



Chris Danou's Capitol Report

No New Revenue Means Bad News for Wisconsin's Roads

A few weeks ago, I wrote about new information regarding Wisconsin's roads that was released by The Road Information Program (TRIP). According to this report that was not contracted by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT), our roads may be in even worse condition than we originally thought with 42% of Wisconsin's major roads being in mediocre to poor condition.

That recent report was just the latest detailed piece of information talking about the poor conditions of our roads. We have known there's more we need to do to fix and fund our roads for quite some time. This information has been conveyed by WisDOT, state and federal lawmakers, local elected officials and leaders, stakeholders and advocacy groups, as well as private citizens who make road-related repairs to their automobiles.

Yet, even with a request for more action from many entities, the Governor and legislative Republicans have continued to kick the can down the road for the last five years. During that time, winters have come and gone with freezing and thawing, and roads in communities across our state have deteriorated. Motorists and other users are still on the roads every day, and the poor road conditions are a significant cost burden that can lead to unsafe conditions for motorists.

The best way to address this issue is to provide more funding from policy made in Madison. Last week, WisDOT Secretary Mark Gottlieb said he would submit a budget funding request for 2017-2019 that offered no major tax or fee increases. Sec. Gottlieb went on to say that not raising revenues will delay major projects, and that available funding will focus more on the backbone of the state's transportation system at the expense of smaller projects in rural areas. This is bad news for us in western Wisconsin.

While this kind of stance might make for good political talking points to the Republican base, the reality is that something needs to be done to address this serious issue in communities across our state. While WisDOT and Gov. Walker are recommending no new funding or taxes to pay for our transportation needs, at least one Republican legislative leader sees the reality of the situation.

Assembly Speaker Rep. Robin Vos (R-Rochester) understands we need to find ways to increase transportation funding in Wisconsin. The Speaker pointed to a January 2013 report that done by the Wisconsin Transportation Finance and Policy Commission, a bipartisan group tasked to study the state's transportation funding system. The group recommended increasing the gas tax by 5 cents a gallon, and increasing the commercial vehicle registration fee and the eight-year driver's license fee. The commission also reported that if Wisconsin wants to maintain current service, traffic flow and road condition levels under our existing funding system, the state will be about \$15 billion short over the next decade.

Two years ago, and before the current budget was enacted, Sec. Gottlieb proposed raising \$750 million from higher taxes and fees, but Gov. Walker rejected those proposals. So, instead of finding new ways to pay for our roads, we had to rely on borrowing to meet our current needs. The current budget authorized \$850 million in transportation borrowing, which is less than the \$1.3 billion that Gov. Walker requested.

According to the non-partisan state agency, the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, twenty percent of every dollar raised by state transportation taxes and fees pays for debt service to build and repair roads. That is almost double what it was a decade ago, and our unwillingness to increase certain taxes and fees will only require us to rely on borrowing even more to fund necessary projects.

It's clear that decisions made by the Governor and Republican-controlled legislature have kicked the can down the road when it comes to transportation funding. However, we can only kick the can so much further because we are running out of road to kick it down. We need to address this issue so we can pay for our transportation needs without putting even more road funding on the credit card. I hope the Governor and other Republican legislative leaders start to have realistic conversations about transportation funding and make responsible decisions today so we avoid even greater funding problems tomorrow.

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